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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN'S OPPOSITION SKEPTICAL OF N-K PEACE AS
RHETORIC ON ALL SIDES HARDENS

REF: BAKU 170

Classified By: Ambassador Reno L. Harnish for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: From separate conversations with working-level contacts among Azerbaijan's opposition political leaders, it is evident that not only do many political activists discount the sincerity of GOAJ efforts to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but few have any concrete ideas of their own. Most trot out rote statements on the need to protect Azerbaijan's territorial integrity (i.e. return to GOAJ control of all seven occupied territories and the former autonomous region of Nagorno Karabakh), a message that resonates with the general public. While one group of civil society activists has focused on the need to reduce radicalism on both sides, even this group of political intellectuals has been unable to agree on concrete steps they can take to move the peace process forward. Without any government officials publicly advocating a "realistic" peace plan, the GOAJ could find itself vulnerable if and when it makes concessions to resolve the conflict. Opposition parties could play a spoiler role on N-K, seizing upon the GOAJ's "betrayal" as the platform they need to regain support following November parliamentary elections.
END SUMMARY.

OPPOSITION PARTIES HAVE LITTLE TO OFFER

¶12. (SBU) Discussions the first week of February with various opposition party deputy chairmen revealed that the parties have little to offer on a resolution to N-K beyond the campaign rhetoric of last year. Asked for their thoughts on the process and the prospect for peace, most responded with doubt that the current regime could pull off a resolution. According to opposition hard-liners, the current regime is not democratic, does not represent the people and is seen as illegitimate. According to the opposition's thinking, any peace deal negotiated by the Aliyev government therefore would not have the best interest of the people at heart. For this reason, according to Fuad Mustafayev (Popular Front Party), the people will reject any peace deal the GOAJ negotiates. However, if the GOAJ were democratic, Mustafayev surmised that the people would give the GOAJ a carte blanche to negotiate in its interest.

¶13. (SBU) In this vein the opposition also criticized the GOAJ for its lack of openness with the people and stated that while it was understood the negotiating strategies of a government cannot be public, the current regime has shared nothing. This leaves the opposition little with which to work, therefore contributing to the rampant (and probably

often unfounded) speculation in opposition newspapers. The lack of information is also used by most with whom we spoke to justify their lack of ideas on how to solve the conflict. Chairman of the Umid Party and current MP Igbal Aghazade said the opposition should be seen as an informal partner and could provide feedback to the current government if allowed to cooperate on some aspects of negotiation points. Harder-line opposition contacts Mustafayev and Sulhaddin Akhbar (Musavat) simply accused the GOAJ of manipulating the conflict for political gain.

¶4. (SBU) Our contacts also had little to offer in terms of what a resolution acceptable to Azerbaijanis would look like.

All unequivocally stated that Azerbaijan's territorial integrity must be upheld, a point that seems to have almost universal resonance in Azerbaijan. The idea of peacekeeping troops once a resolution is reached was not outright rejected, as long as the Russian Federation would not supply those troops. (NATO was referenced as an acceptable alternative). The issue of a referendum was also generally not outright rejected, but most with whom we spoke were less certain what ultimately would be "workable," i.e. a plan that would serve the Azerbaijani interest of maintaining control over N-K. The return of Azerbaijani IDPs to their homelands (Shusha and the occupied territories) is seen as part and parcel with preserving Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Mustafayev, Aghazade, and YES Bloc leader Eldar Namazov all underscored additionally that Azerbaijanis are tolerant people; therefore, Armenians would not need to fear for their security at Azerbaijani hands. Beyond these ideas, however, our contacts had little conception (or would not share) what a realistic, workable peace deal would look like.

¶5. (C) Unique among opposition contacts was Musavat's

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representative, Sulhaddin Akhbar. Although a regular embassy contact, he refused to engage on the issue. Instead, he chose to highlight how US security concerns, Iranian and Russian pressure, and the intensifying debate over Iran's possible nuclear weapons as reasons why the international community and the GOAJ are unlikely to reach a resolution to the conflict. The only constructive points he gave were that if the following five points played any role in the resolution, the deal would be rejected by Azerbaijanis: N-K keeping any of its state symbols, N-K keeping military forces, Lachin and Kelbajar being used as "hostages," (we assume he was referring to a 5 1 1 resolution), any ban on the entry of Azerbaijani military forces to the region, and negotiating access for Armenia through the Lachin corridor. He stated from a position of "authority" that the N-K talks currently focused on Russia's demand for monetary compensation prior to agreeing to any sort of resolution. While Akhbar likely does not speak for the Musavat party itself, he is a close advisor to party chairman Isa Gambar. His conspiracy theories and lack of constructive feedback are worrisome if this is the manner in which the leadership of Musavat (one of the two largest opposition parties) is discussing the N-K conflict with its supporters.

CIVIL SOCIETY: WALKING THROUGH A MINEFIELD

¶6. (SBU) While opposition leaders focus purely on rhetoric, civil society figures tend to have more constructive approaches to the N-K issue. Various groups have been holding almost weekly roundtables and press conferences in Baku to discuss the conflict. One group toiling outside the public's eye is composed of influential civil society and opposition figures such as Arzu Abdullayeva, Eldar Namazov, Zardusht Alizade, Rasim Musabayov and Ilgar Mammedov (former Embassy employee and former country director of the International Crisis Group). At the group's February 6 Meeting, discussion dissolved into a disagreement over the most effective means for civil society to participate in the peace process. While no one expected civil society to

participate in the talks, the group debated to what extent civil society initiatives, such as people-to-people diplomacy and draft agreements, could affect the outcome of the process. Expressing concern about the increasing radicalization of both sides, the one point the group agreed on was the need to counter official GOAJ propaganda vilifying Armenia. The group finally agreed to begin work on a draft constitution for Nagorno Karabakh with input from all parties to the conflict, in hopes that it would stem growing radicalism on both sides.

¶7. (SBU) However, work such as this comes with its own dangers; several members of the group have been criticized and publicly branded as "Armenian spies" for past work involving bridge building with Armenians. These types of accusations crop up in the press periodically. The most recent incident involved the independent scholar Arif Yunus (husband of NGO activist Leyla Yunus). Yunus has been branded as a traitor and an "Armenian" for an interview he gave criticizing corruption within the Ministry of Defense. The independent TV channel ANS picked up the issue and has been calling his statements treasonous, highlighting that an Armenian press agency republished the interview. On January 30 the Minister of Defense reportedly said that only Azerbaijanis of "pure" Azeri origin can criticize the country's armed forces. The next day a group of veterans of the Karabakh conflict stated that any criticism of the armed forces is treasonous.

¶8. (SBU) ANS's February 8 coverage (two days before the Rambouillet talks) continued its negative propaganda, featuring a story on an Azerbaijani musician who traveled to Yerevan with the support of several NGOs to perform an Azeri song at a concert. GOAJ officials lambasted the musician on air, including Deputy Foreign Minister Khalafov and Ombudswoman Elmira Suleymanova saying that they did not agree with his actions, but the people should judge the morality of it. Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev went further, saying that Azerbaijan should change its laws to prevent these kinds of incidents from happening in the future. During the story ANS also carried very disturbing footage of alleged Armenian atrocities, including dead bodies and naked women and children. This type of propaganda, disseminated by both independent and GOAJ sources, severely undermines attempts at mutual understanding, reconciliation, and an eventual resolution to the conflict.

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COMMENT

¶9. (C) Given the close-hold nature of the N-K talks, the complete lack of serious public debate on the issue, and the Azerbaijani public's passionate insistence on the concept of territorial integrity, the GOAJ will face a hard sell in the event it reaches a negotiated settlement with Armenia. The GOAJ's position could be further complicated by the opposition parties, which are bruised and in search of a platform following the difficult November parliamentary elections. Without any prominent political voices speaking out in favor of compromise and mutual understanding, N-K could emerge as exactly the platform the opposition parties need to rally support and regain a political following.

HARNISH